

NorthWestern's Plan: Burn, Baby, Burn

You can find [NorthWestern Energy's net zero plan on its website](#). NorthWestern is Montana's largest utility, a regulated monopoly providing electricity to 405,000 ratepayers and methane gas to 212,000. Over the course of 20 colorful, highly industrial pages, the company trumpets its efforts at sustainability.

The publication is radically disconnected from reality. Climate change is here now and threatening, but reading this plan is akin to imagining British General Cornwallis inspecting the polish on his tea set as the first American cannonballs landed at Yorktown.

Company officials do acknowledge climate change and the importance of cutting carbon emissions. That's progress, but it ends there. Officials say the company can wait until 2035 to curtail greenhouse gas emissions. Trust us, they say. Carbon emissions will all be gone by 2050. The plan might fool some investors dull enough to believe public relations fluff. It's not a serious document laying out an effective plan to combat rapidly warming temperatures endangering Montana's economy and its people.

The company misses the two fundamental goals agreed upon by scientists and the 196 countries that signed the Paris Climate Agreement. Picture a marathon runner in a national championship who runs a completely different course, stops halfway, and then declares himself the winner with a technicolor ticker-tape parade.

NorthWestern says the goal of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is to keep global temperatures below 2 degrees Celsius (2.7 Fahrenheit) as laid out in the Paris Climate Agreement. That's a lie, [a complete misreading of the IPCC report](#). The Paris Agreement says that the overarching goal is to hold "*the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels*" and pursue efforts "*to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.*"

One [recent study concluded that vast areas will become unlivable during "heating events" if temperatures rise to 2 C](#). In other words, large parts of our planet will be too hot even for healthy young humans (18-60-year-olds) to keep a safe core body temperature. These "unsurvivable heat thresholds" will have "potentially deadly consequences if global warming reaches 2°C," said the study's lead author.

NorthWestern also completely misses the IPCC's timeline. [The IPCC says that meeting the 1.5°C goal means the U.S. must reduce emissions 65 percent below 2005 levels by 2030](#). NorthWestern plans to do the exact opposite, going on a binge of new fossil fuel sources until 2035. And then a miracle is supposed to happen. It will thereafter invest only in carbon-free hydro, pumped storage, geothermal, modular nuclear reactors, or hydrogen-fueled generation. NorthWestern will be carbon-free in 2050 . . . 25 years too late.

In the meantime, climate activists must point out NorthWestern's rapidly expanding greenhouse gas emissions portfolio:

- the new [\\$320 million Laurel methane plant](#), which emits nearly a million tons of CO₂ a year.
- acquiring a majority share (55 percent) of [the two massive coal generators at Colstrip](#) in 2026 and pouring out 11 million tons of CO₂ a year until 2043, or later.
- If you accept the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) [estimate of \\$200 in climate damage for each ton of greenhouse gas emissions](#), the company will be liable for over \$40 billion in climate damage by the time its fossil fuel generators go cold.

Notably, the two utilities giving NorthWestern their shares of the coal-burning Colstrip plants (Who gives away legitimate assets?) are keeping their ownership of the 500-kilovolt Colstrip transmission line that connects to the population centers on the West Coast. They will use the line to carry the wind power they are generating in NorthWestern's backyard. Puget Sound Energy plans to begin shipping more than 550 megawatts of cheap wind power out of Montana in the next few years.

Several other obstacles stand in NorthWestern's way and promise to raise power bills. First and foremost, [the EPA's new rules for coal-fired electrical plants, which went into effect last summer](#). Under one set of rules for mercury and air toxics, NorthWestern will have to spend between \$500 million and \$600 million on a new air pollution system. Or it will have to close in 2027. Under the other set of EPA standards, the company would have to install greenhouse-gas-capture technology on its Colstrip smokestacks or transition to burning hydrogen by the mid-2030s.

Fossil fuel companies and red-state attorneys general immediately challenged the EPA rules, of course, but [the Supreme Court refused their emergency request to suspend them](#). Now a federal court fight begins in March in Washington, D.C., and we'll see if Montana's *Held* decision will play a role in the trial. The incoming administration is likely to rewrite the rules, but that will take time. It will provoke a reciprocal court challenge.

Is it time for Montanans to use the "G" word: greed?

In 2019, elected officials representing about 45 percent of NorthWestern's ratepayer base – about 180,000 Montanans – passed resolutions to move to carbon-free electricity by 2030. [The City of Bozeman](#), [the City of Missoula](#), and [the Missoula Board of County Commissioners](#) have been locked in negotiations with NorthWestern for five years to achieve this goal. On the table since 2023 is the prospect of NorthWestern building 50 megawatts of clean power as a modest start. The company won't pull the trigger on the deal.

In contrast to the slow pace of these green power negotiations, NorthWestern has rushed to sign a contract to provide 75 megawatts of coal- and methane-fired power to a new power-hungry Atlas cryptocurrency and data center in Butte. The contract takes effect in 2026. The company has also

signed a contract with an unnamed data center to provide another 50 MW of electricity. This second contract will apparently expand to 250 MW or more in 2025.

Fossil fuels are expensive, and NorthWestern's increasing reliance on them has raised electricity prices in Montana to the point where we are now paying the fourth-highest monthly bills in the U.S. This comes as Stanford University expert Mark Jacobson testified at the *Held* trial that a transition to clean energy would [provide reliable 24/7 electricity](#) and would drop Montana's total annual energy costs from \$9.1 billion to \$2.8 billion by 2050, a 70 percent savings.

Last year, a rate case in front of the Montana Public Service Commission (PSC) raised rates 28 percent for NorthWestern's homeowners and small businesses. Now the company is back for more in 2025. The company's lawyers say its complicated proposal would only raise rates by single digits. [Consumer advocacy groups are saying NorthWestern's rates will soar by another 26 percent.](#) Allowing NorthWestern's rapidly rising rates has put the PSC under the microscope.

Buried in the weeds of the rate case is one final surprise. NorthWestern wants to increase its rate of return on investment from 9.65 percent to 10.6 percent. The company wants to improve its credit rating. Getting an increased kickback on everything it purchases or builds in Montana is something the PSC will also take into consideration sometime later this year.

Stay tuned and hold onto your wallet.